

CHRISTIANITY 101 – Going Back To Move Forward – Part 3

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Pastor Chris Micks, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

WHAT DOES SENDING REALLY LOOK LIKE?

Acts 11:19 - 30

Turn with me in your bible to the book of Acts, chapter 11. We are finishing this 3 part series this morning with a very important topic I think. If you have attended Cedarview for a while now, you know that we are a church that has a big heart for missions, whether local or abroad. We have a group that goes down to Regent Park once a month to help feed the needy. We usually send out 2 – 3 short term missions teams a year, we have World Impact Sundays in the Spring and Fall. 2 of our families have gone or are going out to minister in other countries, the Chaloners in Italy and Amar & Nadi are leaving next month for Guyana. Could we do more? Sure, but only if people are willing to step up and start serving and leading. So sending people to minister the gospel is at the heart of this church and it was in the early church as well. Let's look at our passage:

Acts 11:19-30 – “Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. [20] But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. [21] And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. [22] The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. [23] When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, [24] for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. [25] So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, [26] and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians. [27] Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. [28] And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). [29] So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. [30] And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.”

I love reading about this church in Antioch as I read through the book of Acts. It is one of the standout churches of the last 2000 years. If you study the church in Antioch in your bible, you'll find that it's a model church that we should emulate in many ways.

Antioch was in Syria in those days, in the first century. Today if you were to go to that same place, it's called Antakia and is in the eastern part of Turkey. During the first century, Antioch was a great cultural center but it was a city of gross immorality. It was a city that literally worshipped sex. It was a pagan city full of all kinds of immoral behaviour and it was all bound up in their religion. Just five miles outside the city of Antioch, there was a very famous temple called the Temple of Daphne and that was a temple that was filled with ritual prostitutes. And if you can imagine, that was church for them, that was the centre of their religious life, a temple full of prostitutes. And yet this is the city, this dark immoral place was the city where God raised up a mighty church.

The church never needs to be afraid of the darkness because greater is he that's in you than he that's in the world. If God is for us, who can stand against us! And this is where God raised up the great Antioch church. It became a hub in fact, for all of the missionary enterprises across the world in those days.

If you read through the book of Acts carefully, you'll see that the first 10 chapters is all about the Christianity in Jerusalem, which was the center of the Christian world. It's all about the gospel to the Jews and their Samaritan cousins and the key person in the first 10 chapters is the apostle Peter reaching out to the Jewish people. But the book is divided into two, because then, the church was scattered from Jerusalem by persecution and thrust out to become a powerful missionary movement, the movement Jesus intended when he gave the church that first commission.

From chapter 11 onwards, the center of the Christian world shifted from Jerusalem to Antioch and the key person for the second half of the book of Acts is of course, the apostle Paul, as he reaches out to the gentile world. A shift like that has taken place a number of times in church history. It shifted in the first century from Jerusalem to Antioch and went out from there.

Then in the fourth century under the emperor Constantine, the centre of the church moved to Rome. Then there was a division between east and west, between Rome and Constantinople so you had two centres of Christianity. Then centuries later, in the 16th century, you had the reformation and the centre shifted again, briefly, to Germany, where Martin Luther was. Then to Geneva in Switzerland, under John Calvin.

It's on the move again and the action shifted again to Great Britain as missionaries were sent from England all over the globe. In the 20th century, North America became the hub of missionary outreach but in the last 30 or so years, we would have to say that the centre of Christianity has shifted again. The centres of the greatest missionary drives today is shared between spots like Nairobi, Kenya; Latin America and China. China is sending out missionaries every day, even from an underground church, can you imagine it?

God is continuing to advance his mission gloriously! Don't believe those naysayers that say "Oh, Christianity's in trouble, Christianity is shrinking." We may have some great challenge here in North America about the church and we need to see the church revived but I tell you that around the globe, God is harvesting his church for eternity. Jesus is building his church! He said the gates of hell would not prevail against her and it cannot. God is moving today.

This morning, I want to go right back to the beginnings and look at this amazing church in Antioch.

1) A SURPRISED BEGINNING

The first thing we see here is a surprised beginning. It's astonishing how the gospel came to Antioch and how that church got founded. What we see is the intersection of three great forces at that moment to bring that church into existence.

A) THE PRODUCT OF PERSECUTION

The first force was that it was the product of persecution. That church would not have existed if it weren't for the fact that the Christians in Jerusalem came under intense persecution.

Acts 11:19 – “Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.”

The church went out from Jerusalem, went to these new places and began seeking out the Jews in those cities and telling them the gospel of the Messiah, that Jesus had come. The church has always thrived, had its greatest seasons of growth and expansion, even done its best missionary work during times of persecution. That is absolutely true today.

The fastest growing church in the world right now is the church in Iran, where there's tremendous persecution against Christians. Iran is exploding with the gospel, closely followed by China, again, persecuted Christians driven underground but the gospel is expanding. That's what happened in the first century. For a while, Christianity was very much still a Jewish venture. They somehow seemed to keep their blinders on to the rest of the world. Not really surprising when you look at their upbringing in that Jewish culture that was so prejudiced against the gentile world.

But God stepped in and he allowed that persecution in Jerusalem to heat up to a boiling point until the Christians fled for safety and they scattered across the world. That's how the gospel began to spread. That was the first great force that was at work, the force of persecution.

God is very concerned about the church evangelizing the world and he will do whatever it takes to mobilize us. He will do whatever it takes to get his church to move out in evangelism across the world.

B) THE POWER OF THE PEW

Secondly, you had the power of the pew. Even scattered abroad, the first thing that the Jewish Christians from Jerusalem did, was they looked to evangelize other Jewish people. Then you read verse 20 and it begins with the word "but."

Acts 11:20 – "But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus."

Who were the Hellenists? These are Greek speaking people living in the city of Antioch. So this group of Christians arrived in the pagan city of Antioch and prompted by the Holy Spirit, they did something incredible and unimaginable to most Jews at that time. They preached the gospel to Greek people living there in Syrian Antioch. And lo and behold, they responded and they got saved.

Acts 11:21 – "And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord."

Look at that little phrase in verse 21, “the hand of the Lord was with them.” How did they know the hand of the Lord was with them? Because people were getting saved! This is something that the early church understood very well, that we sometimes lose sight of. Salvation is always completely a miraculous work of God. Every Christian is a miracle. It’s a miracle when somebody comes and gives their life to the Lord.

People are not born again unless the Holy Spirit draws them and convicts them and regenerates them with spiritual life and grants them the gifts of repentance and faith. Only God can do that in people’s lives.

When they got the news back in Jerusalem about souls being saved in Antioch, those Jewish leaders thought, “What on earth is going on?” They had a hint of what was coming when the Lord sent Peter down to preach to a Roman named Cornelius and his household, but they had not yet shifted their attention to the gentile world.

Now God just thrust them out, he did it himself, no counsel necessary, no missions board, no committee meetings, God allowed a little persecution and then he got hold of a group of people running for their lives to Antioch. And Antioch would become the perfect missions sending depot for the whole known world. God knew what he was doing.

This story shows us that God is so committed to his plan of saving his church out of every tribe and nation. Reaching out to these gentiles in Antioch was the first step of getting the gospel to all of Asia, Africa and Europe. God himself went after our ancestors. Most of us in this room are gentiles, right? We have the gospel today because of God’s determination and it began in earnest in Antioch.

Now look at who God used. Where were the great apostles? They were back in Jerusalem. All the ordained preachers, all the officials but God took up this little group of people and we don’t even know their names. We just know that they were Jewish Christians from Cyprus and Cyrene and we know that they were on fire and full of the Holy Spirit and God led them to preach to the Greeks of the city and the outcome was amazing!

I said there were three great forces that were converging to produce this beginning in Antioch. The first is it was the product of persecution, secondly, the power of the pew.

C) THE PURPOSE OF GOD

Thirdly, it was the purpose of God. It was God's moment, he was not taking no for an answer. He was not willing to wait on the church to figure out that they needed to move out of Jerusalem. He was ready and the time was right. God's will is going to be done, he is in control. God is using his church, but he will do whatever it takes.

If we miss the day of his visitation, if we aren't involved, we will be the ones who miss out because God is going to get it done.

So that's the first thing we see in this story, a surprised beginning. Out of nowhere it seemed but out of the missionary heart of God, this gentile church was born in Antioch. Here's a simple principle that we need to be absolutely certain of in our hearts, it's this: God has a plan for every church.

God had that whole future of that little congregation exploding and sending missionaries around the world, he had a plan for that church in Antioch and he has a plan for Cedarview Community Church, and he's got a plan for you and a plan for me and for us together.

2) A STRONG GROUNDING

Secondly, we see a strong grounding. This church in Antioch had an astonishing start but then God gave them something that is vitally important for every church. Look with me starting at verse 22:

Acts 11:22-26 – “The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. [23] When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, [24] for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. [25] So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, [26] and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.”

So back in Jerusalem, they hear this startling story about some non-Jews living in Antioch that have come to faith in Christ. Could it be God? Is God doing this? If it's genuine conversion, it had to be God because only he can do that. There was that vision that Peter had had and the Cornelius incident, and they did remember that Jesus had said “Go into all the world and

preach the gospel.” All the tumblers started falling into place at last for them and they said “we’d better get someone up there to Antioch. Someone we trust, with discernment and wisdom, who’s full of the Holy Spirit, that hears from God and is a man of faith.” So they sent Barnabas and if you remember from last week, he was also an encourager!

So Barnabas headed up to Antioch and what he found there, it says, delighted him, it was a real work of God, he knew these people had gotten saved and a church was forming, he could see it. He encouraged them and he preached and it says that more people started to get saved. It began to grow and then Barnabas thought to himself, “this is big, I need help!”

And led by God, he took a quick trip down to a place called Tarsus and he found a guy that he knew he needed. That old enemy of the church, that persecutor of the saints. His name was Saul of Tarsus, though now we know him as Paul. At that time, he was only starting to be known, he was still in obscurity and many Christians didn’t trust him because of his past even though the call of God was on his life, specifically the call was on him to go to the gentiles.

The stage was set for Antioch. So Paul came back with Barnabas to the city of Antioch and for the next year, they taught the word of God side by side. They instructed the church, they set solid foundations in it. That church was going to need very strong foundation because this was going to be the launching pad for the rest of the known world as I have already said before. It had to be a strong church.

They laid a strong foundation and it says at the end of verse 26 that they taught a great many people. They had a crowd and it was getting stronger every day.

One of the characteristic marks of the early church and particularly this church in Antioch is that they were a soul-winning church, an evangelistic church. I don’t mean just the pastors, every believer, that’s the church of Jesus Christ. When these first believers in Antioch preached the gospel in that idolatrous, promiscuous city, God blessed their witness. Those in Antioch turned from their idols to the true and living God and they renounced their idolatry.

One by one, people began to come in out of paganism to follow Christ. How many believe that no matter how dark or secular or immoral a society may become, the gospel of Jesus when it is preached, is greater than the darkness. Paul says in the book of Romans that **the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile. (Romans 1:16).**

Whenever you share the gospel with someone, you've got to believe the power of God is being let loose in their life. Anybody telling the word of God has the power to release all of God's great power in people's lives.

Now there's something at the end of verse 26 that I don't want you to overlook or miss. **Acts 11:26** – “...**And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.**” Up until this point, they were usually called by the name “The Way.” It was the way of Christ, it was the way of Jesus the Nazarene so they were called “the way”. But they were called lots of nasty names as well.

But in Antioch they were called Christians and it literally means “Christ's ones.” And by the reading of the text here, they didn't give themselves that name. They weren't sitting there trying to come up with a catchy name or contacting a marketing agency. Christian wasn't a denominational tag, it's what the city called them, it's what the people called them, they are Christ's ones.

Do you know what this tells me? They didn't go around telling people about their church, they didn't go around telling people about their preachers, “*You should come and hear this guy Paul and his friend Barnabas, they're awesome.*” Not at all, what did they talk about? They talked about Jesus, they preached about him who had come and died on a cross for the sins of the whole world and he'd been buried but he was risen again and he changed their lives.

It was all about Jesus so they became Christ's ones. They talked about him so much that unbelieving people called them Christ's ones. Quite possibly, in the beginning, it was a term of contempt but you know what, the believers wore it as a badge of honour and to this very day, that's our title! How many of you are thrilled to tell people, “I'm a Christian, I belong to Jesus, he's my Saviour, he's my King, I'm a Christian today!”

Don't ever be ashamed of his name, even if some parts of society say “Oh, they're a dangerous lot.” We want to be dangerous to the devil, we want to be dangerous to hatefulness, dangerous to sin in the world but we don't want to be dangerous to people as we bring them the love of Christ. We want to show them all that God has for them. We are Christians, we follow Jesus.

So we have the surprised beginning, all that God did to start that church and then there was a strong grounding. In the providence of God, Paul and Barnabas were sent to establish the

work and it quickly became a strong soul-winning church. Please hear me carefully on this principle. No church can be healthy and dynamic without strong discipleship. Without people being trained in God's word, being built up in their faith through God's word, without the scriptures getting a hold of their life through good solid teaching so that they can live out the faith that's been given to us by the apostles.

Think of another church in the New Testament, the church down in Corinth. That church was full of charismatic gifts, they were filled with excitement but they were a weak and troubled church. Antioch was well taught, strongly disciplined and they were a powerful church.

Let me ask you this question for you to think about all this week: What is your plan for disciplined growth as a disciple over the next year, for you to grow as a believer? For you to step up to the next stage of your Christian faith. We can provide every option for you to get that teaching, we can teach the bible every Sunday, we can have Christian Ed classes or Wednesday Connection groups that are discussing God's word and getting in to it, we can provide all these things but if you don't make the decision, "I'm going to grow as a Christian", it won't happen. We need a church full of people being disciplined.

3) A SPIRITUAL FLOURISHING

Number 3, a spiritual flourishing. A surprised beginning but a strong grounding and then out of this strength came a spiritual flourishing. This church did see supernatural things, the Holy Spirit was moving in this church. It was not dry and stagnant, it was full of the Holy Spirit. They opened their hearts and their lives to God's working and God's power.

It says here in these verses that we read that there were prophets in that church, I'm talking about real prophets, not like the granola prophets we have these days, flakes and fruits and nuts, most of them. These guys were the real deal. One of them by the name of Agabus, heard from God and he actually accurately prophesied a famine that was going to come into Judea and it happened exactly as God had told him. That's ultimately the proof of a prophet. That what they say comes to pass. And in the Old Testament, it said if it doesn't come to pass, take them outside the city gates and stone them. They're worthless.

But this man was full of the Holy Spirit and prophetically he spoke about a famine that was coming down there in Judea and it came to pass. He didn't prophesy that to get a big name, go on tour and sell a book. God told the church that information for a specific reason because

God loves his people and a very hard time was about to come to the Christians in Judea and they were going to suffer.

So what did they do in Antioch when they heard this word from God? They responded to the need even before it happened. It says they raised money and they sent relief down to their Christian brothers in Judea for when the famine came. They looked after another part of the church.

You had a small new gentile church that looked after its bigger established Jewish brother church. Don't you think that did a lot for the unity of the early church? Don't you think that helped to bury some of the old prejudices? Isn't God good and wise?

The church in Antioch was full of the power of the Holy Spirit not for prestige or glory, but for fruitfulness and the first fruit was harvest. Souls being saved will always be the greatest miracle the church ever sees. More important than anything else is that people be saved and that was happening in Antioch.

Secondly, compassion ministry. Their love was overflowing to help others. Remember this: ***God loves on churches that love what he loves.*** This church in Antioch began to go from strength to strength to strength because they were obedient to keep doing God's priorities so he kept on blessing them.

It's not about doing things and asking God, "God will you bless what I'm doing here." How about you look at what God is doing and start doing. Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision prayed this prayer years ago, he prayed "Lord, let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God."

What's on God's heart? Let's do that and he will keep on blessing. God loves on churches who love what he loves.

Just flip the page in your bible from Acts 11 to Acts 13, and I'm closing with this. Acts 13 is the continuing story of the church in Antioch.

Acts 13:1-4 – "Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. [2] While they were worshiping the Lord

and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” [3] Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. [4] So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.”

4) A SELFLESS SENDING

Here in this passage, we see the final step in the progression that is a selfless sending. They’ve had an amazing beginning, they were grounded well and brought up with amazing teaching, they began to flourish in the Holy Spirit but then they began a selfless sending.

This is the moment that the gospel exploded forward from Palestine and Syria to the rest of the known world. As the church was worshipping, fasting, being sensitive to the Holy Spirit. The gathered believers were led to do something, send Barnabas and Paul on mission. Why would they do that? Barnabas and Saul, these are the guys who have been pouring in and making that work so solid. It’s under their ministry that the Holy Spirit has been flourishing. Why would they do this? They loved Saul and Barnabas, they loved their teaching, they loved everything that was going on, yes, but listen, missional churches send their best on mission.

Missional churches send their best, their best people, their best resources, their best praying. It’s not just about our needs but it’s about the needs of those who are reaching out with the gospel from us. Remember, God sent us his best. The greatest missionary in the world was God’s best, he sent his one and only Son to save us.

So there’s this principle. *If a church isn’t sending, it’s ending.* This goes hand in hand with God loves on churches that love what he loves. If we are not sending, it won’t take long for God to say, “If you’re not going to do it, I’ll bless someone else.”

Churches go through cycles, they go through cycles of birth and growth and life and death, unless mission is kept at the core, then the cycle can go back to new life and continuing in the blessing of God. But if a church isn’t sending, it’s ending.

This church in Antioch became kind of a mission control as the gospel went out to the ends of the earth. They were the lifeline for missionaries that went out all across the Mediterranean.

In World War 2, they figured out that for every one man on the front lines of battle, they needed approximately 20 personnel behind that man supporting him with all kinds of logistical support, people who were just behind the lines supporting him but then all the people at home who were making the ammunition and sending it there, who were keeping the economy going, who was sending the food and the supplies. Behind every man, they needed 20 people to have him there.

We are in a war. We are in a spiritual battle for the souls of men. Nothing is more important in the universe right now than this war effort and God has declared it. For every global worker that is out on the field, you need people who are sending them, praying for them, loving on them, believing with their whole heart that that mission will be successful as we send them.

Every church needs to be sending our best. As our young people get disciplined and growing in the things of God, some of them, God will call and he will say, I want you to go to other places and we're not to say, "Oh, hang on, we need these young people to keep our church vibrant." No, God's got thousands he can bring in. If they get the call of God in their life, we need to send our best to the ends of the earth.

We know this is a church with a missional heart, we see that at World Impact when we send our money to support so many projects that otherwise might not happen. And we are send short term teams usually twice a year, but they are short term. Let's continue to send our bodies, let's send our kids, let's all consider that maybe your retirement needs to be spent with some other group rather than just sitting around. We have seen families go from here, Dan and Jennifer Chaloner, who will be here next Sunday morning. Amar and Nadi Ram, who are leaving next month. And I know that God is working on others as well.

But maybe God's call is for you to stay here. I pray that this place gets filled up with people who believe that their mission field is the area around them, their street, their subdivision, their school, their work, their city. So whether it's staying or going, we each have a part to play in the sending and being a part of it.

Let's pray.